Patrick Dudgeon

Rudyard Kipling's "The Janeites"[1]

Ilustraciones originales de
Susana de Tezanos Pinto de Arana Tagle

The story "The Janeites," which gives us our name, appeared in a book called *Debits & Credits*, published by Rudyard Kipling towards the end of his life, in 1926, nine to ten years before his death.

An interesting point for research is when Kipling discovered Jane Austen. His father was a man of letters and may have had one, or some, of the six novels in his library at Lahore and may have talked to his son about them. Rudyard Kipling is unlikely to have read any of them at school, in England, in the late 1870s and early 1880s. Jane Austen did not make her début on school syllabuses until she had become a classic in the middle of the 20th century. I have a feeling that he discovered Jane Austen late in life when he settled down in England and devoted himself to English history and folklore. Formerly a writer about action, whose poems portray and exalt England's imperial past, he would have been attracted, pleased by these Dutch interiors, charming portraits of domestic peace and happiness.

The two poems accompanying the story are the finest tribute in all English Literature by one writer to another. "Jane's Marriage" is obviously prompted by the English proverb "(True) marriages are made in heaven."

The story has a subtitle which is not always reproduced. Notice that it is "The Survival," i.e. that which, what survives, not "The Survivor," viz the one who survives. That is important.

The point of the parenthesis "Horace Ode 22 Book V" (or Book I?) is probably to say that the story is a prose version of the famous *Integer vitae*, which Kipling studied at school and remembered and I learnt also at school much later, the first eight of the twenty-two lines remaining in my head.

The subject of the poem is that the virtuous man, the guileless one, may go unarmed through the desert, the mountains and the dark wood. With love in his heart he is secure.

Humberstall, the protagonist, is blown up twice on the Western Front in the Great War, or WWI, as they call it today. He is a man back from the dead. It is thus a Lazarus story, as Kipling indicates by making Brother Burges reply to "I's"question as to whether or not he shows it much with "No-o. No more than Lazarus did." One of the few Lazarus stories, strange to say, in English literature. The others are Browning's dramatic monologue in *Men and Women* and Eugene O'Neill's *Lazarus Laughs*.

Humberstall was blown up first in the 1915–16 offensive or defensive, at a place he anglicises as "Eatables." This is probably Étaples, just south of Boulogne, a little inland. The British soldiers would have embarked probably at Newhaven and disembarked at Boulogne to

[1] The following were the main points made by Mr. Patrick Dudgeon in his talk to the Jane Austen Society of Buenos Aires on the above subject, at the Museo Roca Buenos Aires, on April 4, 2003.

take up their positions at Étaples southwest of the Somme. The second time he says he was at the back of Lar Pug Noy. This is almost certainly Lapugnoi, near Calais, where the British built their first war cemetery and where 1500 British and Dominions dead are buried, among them the young Agar-Robertes, Viscount Clifden's son and heir presumptive, whom Kipling knew and from whom he may have learned some of the facts behind this fiction.

When invalided out of the Army, Humberstall was sent to Bath for the waters to cure his trench foot and there, unconsciously, he began his acquaintance with Jane Austen by learning the names of the streets like Laura Place where the Dowager Viscountess Dalrymple and the Hon. Miss Carteret, Sir Walter Elliot's cousins, "hung out."

Humberstall is the typical artillery soldier working the huge guns, a great carthorse of a fellow, naturally silent unless spoken to, only talking when Anthony, a little dark, humpbacked fellow, his antithesis, another old soldier, Tommy, back in Civvy St., draws him out, pumps him, but when he gets going, is amazingly fluent and direct, speaking simply but with the trenchant phrasing of the common man and the euphemistic irony of English humour, e.g. talking of his superiors, the officers, "They never repeated. They wasn't radishes."

Unknown to himself, he was sent back to the Front out of sympathy, as a non-combatant, and was made mess waiter to the battery or artillery he was assigned to. The reason he gives Anthony for going back is a fine example of English humour. Really what he missed was the comradeship and the acquaintanceship of fine men.

When he joins up again with a fresh battery somewhere at the back of "Lar Pug Noy," he cannot believe his eyes and ears when he sees and hears his superiors, the officers of the unit, all differences of rank forgotten, with their heads together, talking fifteen to the dozen about some Jane woman, a nonesuch apparently, the only woman they had a good word for, with Lieutenant Gander, as they nicknamed the "little squirt of a fellow" who joined them last, all holding forth about this Jane woman; and then his immediate superior, Macklin, mess-steward, with a face like a dead mackerel, butting in and proving that Henry James was Jane Austen's literary successor. Humberstall thought they were arguing about whether Jane Austen had children or not and that Macklin was asserting that she did and that 'Enery James was her son. Only they didn't say who the sire was.

His surprise is even greater when Macklin passes out, "bosko absoluto," as usual at the end of the day, and the commanding officer, Major Hammick, just tells him to take him away and put him to bed.

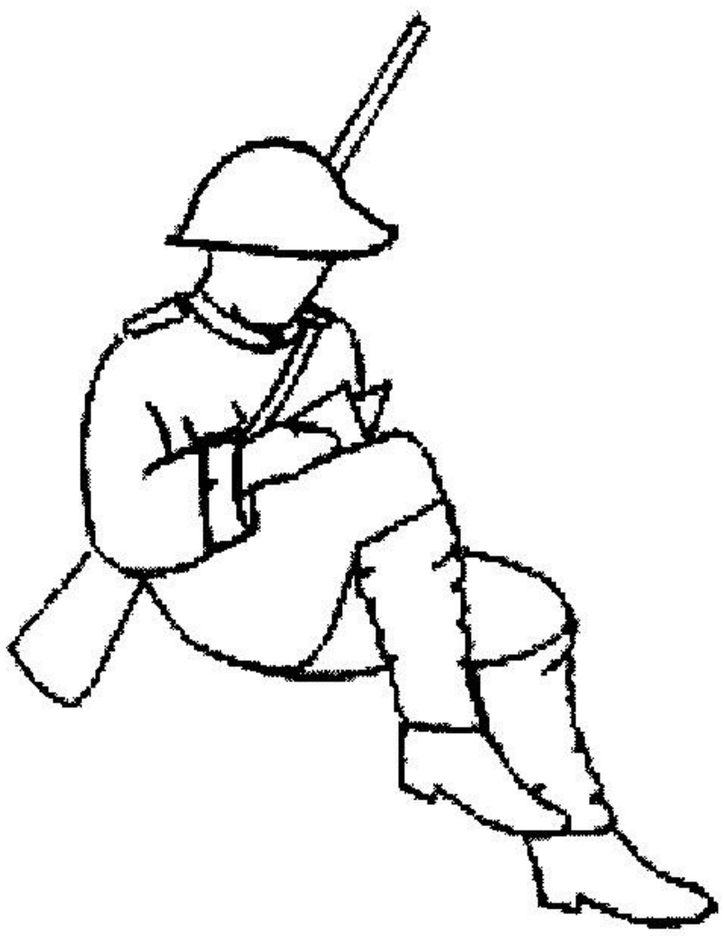
The next day, after Macklin "'ad settled 'iz stummick," Humberstall got on to him and asked to be admitted into this secret, and obviously mutual benefit, society. At first Macklin is scornful: "You, a Janeite, you Dobbin, you old carthorse, you're not fit to be initiated!" But then he thinks it over, thinks better of it, charges Humberstall a quid entry fee, and sets to work.

Initiation meant learning the titles of the six novels and the names of the chief characters. Humberstall, first generation to intensive book learning, with a good memory, despite his shell shock and obviously occasional blackouts, made an excellent pupil and Macklin was a fine teacher.

The sign or password that earned Humberstall his first share of the Janeites' perks—half a dozen fags (cigarettes), best Turkish—was "Tilniz an' trap-doors."Tilniz is an imitated phonetic transcription of Tilney's or Tilneys—the Tilney family in *Northanger Abbey*—and "trap-doors," the secret doors or drawers of the writing-desk or cupboard Catherine Morland opened in her bedroom at the Abbey and found an old washing-bill which she took to be a document compromising the "wicked" General and the door of the room where Bluebeard Tilney had put away his wife or done away with her.

Note that Macklin must have had at least one Jane Austen novel with him at the Front, in the dug-out where they were living, probably *Persuasion*, his favourite and probably Rudyard Kipling's too, because at one point he tells Dobbin to sit down and get two paragraphs by heart.

Humberstall's report to Anthony and I on her novels are a highlight of the story. Coming to serious, high-class literature for the first time with an unbiased mind, he found the characters were no use, i.e. did no manual work, and that nothing happens. It was all about young ladies



going to balls and card-parties, and blokes going off to London on horseback for a haircut. They weren't adventurous or smutty, i.e. pornographic. But he also saw how amazingly true to life it all was.

Humberstall's statement "They're all on the make in Jane Austen" might provoke an amusing article for our newsletter. What critic or professor of literature would have dared to say so much!

Humberstall realizes he has met Jane Austen's outstanding characters. He used to know a wholesale grocer's wife near Leicester who might have been the duplicate of the hard-mouthed Duchess or Baronet's wife, Lady Catherine, and when he was a Boy Scout, their troop-leader was just like the Reverend Collins; and his own mother, and Anthony's too, would have acted just like General Tilney with Catherine Morland.

Notice that all this part of the story is concerned with toffs or gentlemen, Humberstall's superiors, the officers commanding the battery he was attached to, and their intellectual interests, though we are at the Front in 1917 in the heat of Ludendorf's terrific offensive to smash the Allied lines—"Jerry's March push" in Humberstall's ironical euphemism. We might be in the heart of Belgravia or in a comfortable English country house with the servants bringing the meals up or in and the port, a toff's drink and the only beverage mentioned, by the way, going round. We do not see the soldiers, the rank and file, anybody in fact below the B.S.M. or Battery Sergeant Major, an N.C.O. in charge of the men. The war qua war, in fact, does not come in until the end.

All Humberstall's superiors are well-read gentlemen occupying good positions in

civilian life: Major Hammick in Civvy Street was a High Court divorce lawyer; Captain Mosse ran a detective agency specializing in "following erring couples while you wait"; Lieutenant Gander, an actuary, a cross between a lawyer and an accountant, working out how long you have to live for the purposes of an annuity or a pension; and Macklin, Humberstall's immediate superior, whom Humberstall says was something of a schoolteacher, was clearly a very senior school-master or else a university lecturer or professor.

The amusing episode of chalking the guns with the names of Jane Austen characters, which led to the mock court martial requested by the B.S.M. to get his own back on Macklin who was fond of passing remarks, earned Humberstall the warm congratulations of the senior Janeites and, since Humberstall didn't drink, a hundred fags down.

Humberstall in his enthusiasm as a Janeite had dubbed their biggest gun, the Skoda, Lady Catherine De Bugg, his blunt adaptation of the name of Darcy's formidable aunt which struck the B.S.M. as an "obese" i.e. obscene, word.

Note that Humberstall's quasi-monologue is skilfully broken by Kipling, at the commencement and in the middle, to let Humberstall's interlocutor, Anthony, get a word in edge-ways. When the protagonist is endeavouring to remember the name of their commanding officer, Anthony turns to I and tells him about a major skid he had one day in his taxi when the roadway was so greasy or slippery that he ran into a refuge near the Marble Arch. The second is longer, a page or so, when Anthony breaks in on Humberstall's account of the remarks Macklin passed about the B.S.M. by telling them of his experience with a fare who turned out to be a chap he had helped get the orange crop in the Holy Land when they were in the Army. It is here that we have another of the famous euphemisms the story is full of, viz. "In lots of ways this war has been a public noosance, as one might say, but there's no denyin' it 'elps you slip through life easier."

The finale is dramatic: the despatch rider crashing through their camouflage screen and conking out, the Brass Hat complete with brown gloves—Humberstall doesn't miss a detail—advising retreat; the argument, apparently heated but really ironical, between Major and Lieutenant, the commanding officer's decision to lie doggo spoilt by the arrival of a body of reinforcements, almost schoolboys just out from England, whose commander, a cheerful little fellow with a bald head, feels he must support the guns. So they start digging themselves in, drawing the attention of the enemy artillery and aircraft so that a terrific barrage sets in, and the dug-out with the Janeites blown up by a direct hit.

That last scene of all with Humberstall's words must be one of the outstanding examples of euphemism in English literature.

Alone of the Janeites Humberstall survives, blown up for the second time and coming down practically in his birthday suit to a scene of horror and destruction. In the final sauve-qui-peut with the survivors climbing on to lorries making for the railway line and the last train to the coast, Humberstall's condition as a Janeite stands him in good stead. He is helped first by a nurse talking away fifteen to the dozen and recognizes a Miss Bates, and when he calls her this name to a superior lady, "all teeth and nose," who is probably a titled

lady doing war work as matron, she is delighted recognizing a fellow Janeite and says that she'll get him on to the train even if she has to kill a Brigadier, which she does without having to resort to extremities, wedging the protagonist in close to the cooker so that he was served a mug of hot beef tea.

What survives is civilization: comradeship, living together, good conversation, orderly domestic life, home, what in fact the Janeites kept up "in the jaws of death, in the mouth of hell" and the soldiers in the trenches were longing to get back to.

"We was a 'appy group," says Humberstall and the B.S.M. dancing about while directing the men to dig for the victims of the bomb repeats "It was a great push." This sums up the comradeship and civilization in the midst of barbarism.

Notice that Rudyard Kipling cleverly gives his story a Jane Austen ending. Anthony asks I at the end when the protagonist has left the Lodge whether he thinks Humberstall made it all up and whether Jane really existed. I politely answers that he thinks she did and was something of a matchmaker in her day so Anthony had better be careful, at which the latter laughs and says that that's a foregone conclusion. In other words, he is engaged and about to get married. All Jane Austen's novels end with a match and a marriage.

All the senior Janeites are killed; the convert alone survives. This may be in accord with the facts, unknown to us, behind the fiction, but it savours of religion in the accepted or usual sense of the word. Kipling was probably brought up C. of E., and his mother—one of the four Macdonald sisters who became the mothers of great men (Rudyard Kipling, Stanley Baldwin, Edward Poynter and Edward Burne-Jones)—may have added some Church of Scotland fervour. Then, in mature life, he adopted Freemasonry, which is also a religion. The Christians from St. Paul onwards argued incessantly about justification by Faith or by Works. The Freemasons, to judge by the name of the Masonic Lodge in the East End of London where the action of this story is laid, apparently put an end to the twaddle by adopting the two. Now Christianity teaches that the founder of the religion and many of his disciples had to die a terrible death for their Gospel to spread. A writer, to be sure, creates and destroys to suit the exigencies or convenience of his plot. It may be, however, that the ending was influenced by the author's religious upbringing and beliefs.

Notice, too, that the common man survives. All his life Kipling exalted the common man; the British soldier in India, the Indian soldier, the Indians themselves, Hindus and Moslems, the boy Mowgli; all his life he had, like Dickens, his ear close to the ground so that he can reproduce the speech of the soldier of the rank and file, the Tommy, and the working man, in this particular case, a hairdresser, Humberstall, who joined up in the Artillery when war broke out. Respectful but sharp, gentle for all his heftiness, eloquent though the product of elementary schooling, he is Kipling's hero, the modern version of Horace's *Integer vitae, scelerisque purus*. He'd never told a lie since he was six according to Anthony who had it from his sister, kept off alcohol though he enjoyed his cigarette, and did well whatever he was called upon to do in that state of life in which he was called.

Kipling himself remained Mr. Rudyard Kipling though his achievements and the fact that he was cousin to the Prime Minister and much admired by old King George v might

have earned him an earldom or a knighthood. He might have become Earl Kipling of Burwash or Sir Rudyard Kipling O.M. He even let it be known that he would not accept the Poet Laureateship even if it were offered him, and it was his almost since the death of Tennyson in 1892, though it is supposed by some that Queen Victoria, who did not forget or forgive "The Widow of Windsor," declined to accept the author as the successor of Tennyson. The proudest English title is perhaps that which a common man, a trades-union leader, Ernest Bevin, who became Minister of Labour in Winston Churchill's war ministry, conferred upon his sovereign, King George VI: "A very decent fellow." It suits Humberstall down to the ground and sums up what Kipling tells us.

Humberstall's parting words at the Lodge of Instruction attached to "Faith and Works N° 5837 E.C." on that Saturday afternoon in 1920 are not to be forgotten: "Well, as pore Macklin said, it's a very select Society, an' you've got to be a Janeite in your 'eart, or you won't have any success. An' yet he made me a Janeite! I read all her six books now for pleasure 'tween times in the shop (remember it was at the back of Ebury St., i.e. firmly in Belgravia, the posh residential quarter of London); an' it brings it back—down to the smell of the glue-paint on the screens. You take it from me, Brethren, there's no one to touch Jane when you're in a tight place. Gawd bless 'er, whoever she was."